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Abstract

In Austria, the Krampus has recently witnessed an unprecedented boom. Since the early 2000s, the number of troupes and organized events has skyrocketed. Most of these can be termed 'invented traditions' in Hobsbawm's sense, as there are only a handful of places with a history of the practice from before the mid-twentieth century. Despite the vast differences between regions, young men in all of them dress up in masks that invoke associations with the devil or demons, wear long fur suits and roam the streets scaring and attacking onlookers with the switches they carry. Investigating contemporary Krampus practices in rural Austria, we argue that they serve as important sources of identity making, at the centre of which are relations between men and women, as well as between ethnic Austrians and immigrants. Through an engagement with anthropological discussions on identity, our article will suggest that the recent Krampus boom is indicative of new forms of white identity politics in Europe.

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Introduction

'Krampuses are very very very wild. And Krampuses are very beautiful', an eight-year-old pupil from Dorfgastein in Austria wrote in her school essay on Saint Nicholas's Day in 2011. She is not alone in her ambivalence regarding its attractiveness for her. Confronted with the Krampus, hardly anyone remains indifferent. Tourists produce their cameras, children roam the streets to tease them or hide in the attic gripped by panic. At the bar of a pub in Dorfgastein, elderly locals shake their heads out of concern and complain about the decline of the 'true Krampus tradition' when asked about changing customs, especially when they talk about the 'excesses' they encounter when they travel beyond the valley. To them, a Krampus is a young local man dressed in a wooden mask with at least three pairs of goat- and ram-horns, a long fur coat, a belt from which three to four large, loud bells hang and a switch in his hands. In groups of four to eight, they accompany Saint Nicholas and walk from house to house in early December. But take a thirty-minute drive to a similar pub in a similar small town, and people's imagination of the 'true' Krampus might be very different.

Fig. 1. 'De Entrischn', a Krampus troupe on the streets of Dorfgastein, 6.12.2011. Photo: Matthäus Rest

Austria has seen a tremendous increase in Krampus events since the turn of the millennium (Ebner 2018; Rest and Seiser 2016; Ridenour 2016). Today there are hundreds of them every autumn all over the country. Many active Krampuses insist that 'their' custom is hundreds or even thousands of years old, and they often use such words as 'pagan', 'pre-Christian', 'Celtic' or 'Germanic' (Müller and Müller 1999: 458; Berger 2007: 121). However, there is no written evidence for the practice before 1582 (Schuhladen 1992: 24). In the mid-nineteenth century we know of only a few villages scattered across the Austrian and Bavarian Alps where groups of young, unmarried men dressed up in horned wooden masks, fur suits and cow bells in an attempt to impersonate the devil. The majority of these towns are on the fringes of the former Prince-Archbishopric of Salzburg.[1] A first wave of expansion and consolidation of the custom occurred in the four decades before the outbreak of the First World War, an era that Eric Hobsbawm (1983: 263 ff.) has aptly described as one of 'mass-producing traditions'. This expansion links the Krampus to many other 'invented traditions' all over Europe, such as the pageantry of the British royal family or the introduction of personifications of nations like 'Germania'.

In 2014 in the Gastein valley alone, there were 97 '*Passen*' (Krampus groups) (Hochwarter 2014). The valley is about an hour's drive south of Salzburg and has a population of 13,000 inhabitants divided into the three municipalities of Bad Gastein, Bad Hofgastein and Dorfgastein. Each '*Pass*' comprises of Saint Nicholas; the 'basket carrier', whose large basket is filled with small bags of sweets to be left in people's homes; sometimes one or two (female) angels; and four to eight Krampuses. On 5th and 6th December only the Krampus groups walk from house to house to reward good children and punish naughty ones. In most other regions, the Krampus season stretches from early November until Christmas. Many of these troupes do not include a Saint Nicholas and only visit houses by prior arrangement, with most people encountering them exclusively during a specially organized event most commonly referred to as *Krampuslauf*, that is, a Krampus *run*.

In the old town of Salzburg, these events are the highlights of Christmas tourism. There, the groups are hand-picked 'according to custom'. They provide spectacular performances in compliance with all safety regulations, yet are always ready for a selfie with the excited crowd of tourists. In stark contrast to these tame tourist performances are the Krampus events in the suburbs and rural towns. Also, they have various security arrangements. Sometimes, Krampuses and onlookers are separated by barriers and a large contingent of security personnel. At other times, only loose ropes separate

1 From the Late Middle Ages until the Napoleonic Wars, the Archbishopric of Salzburg was an ecclesiastical principality and state of the Holy Roman Empire. Its territory was larger than the present-day state of Salzburg. Both the region/state and its capital are called Salzburg.

onlookers from the performers or there are no boundaries at all. In the annual parade in Sankt Johann im Pongau, halfway between Salzburg and Gastein, a thousand Krampuses divided into eighty troupes move along a designated, marked route. Thousands of spectators fight for spots in the first row to witness the morbid vitality. Here, the troupes look much more diverse than at the tourist events. While some follow the 'traditional' aesthetics,[2] others display so-called 'future' masks[3] that are inspired by contemporary splatter and fantasy movies. In addition, the ambiance is more direct, aggressive and emotional at these events, which are intended for a 'local' audience with fewer cameras, more action and increased adrenaline.

Fig. 2. Tourists at a Krampus event in front of Salzburg Cathedral, 5.12.2013.
Photo: Matthäus Rest

When we look at the literature, however, the substantial increase in Krampus events and the diversification of aesthetics and performative possibilities have hardly been taken into account.[4] Instead, Krampus is described as a custom with 'pagan roots', originally confined to remote mountain val-

2 Starting in the 1930s, both in the Gastein valley and in Matrei professionally trained woodcarvers began to develop new types of Krampus masks. These masks were discovered by early folklorists, and collected and exhibited in museums. Consequentually, two distinct mask styles developed, making these two regions the historical centres of 'traditional' masks (Koenig 1983; Grieshofer 1992).

3 People use the English word.

4 With the notable exception of Johannes Ebner (2018), whose findings in many respects mirror our own. For a recent and comprehensive English discussion, see Ridenour (2016).

leys, whose aim was to cast out winter and its evil spirits (see El-Monir et al. 2006). Johannes Ebner (2018: 33) rightly observes that this 'mythological interpretation' remains the hegemonic origin story of the Krampus, despite the clear lack of supporting evidence. Under the influence of tourism, so this traditionalist line of argumentation continues, the 'original custom' has been 'sanitized' and become meaningless public entertainment. We believe that this explanation hides more than it reveals. In the Austrian media, on the other hand, the Krampus is often connected to sexualized violence, alcoholism, atavism, rural backwardness, low levels of education and right-wing nationalism (Schnöller forthcoming). However, just looking at the scale and diversity of the Krampus shows that both the 'mythological' and the 'atavistic' explanations fall short of explaining the phenomenon.

The aim of this article, then, is to make sense of the Krampus as a multilayered masculine youth culture that navigates between appropriation and boundary-making with respect to the custom and its custodians. For this, we have engaged with the people who become Krampuses every year to show how contradictory their interpretations can be. After five years and three periods of fieldwork in Salzburg and Tyrol,[5] we are convinced that the Krampus offers a unique opportunity to think through contemporary social and political configurations in Austria and beyond. Despite the fact that there is now a small but growing number of women becoming Krampuses, the overwhelming majority of active participants are men between the ages of sixteen and thirty. This age range, we believe, is one important reason why the Krampus is so strongly (and arbitrarily) associated with both children and sexuality. Male participants enter the scene when they are on the cusp between childhood and adolescence, and they leave when they become fathers. Therefore, as Lisa Kolb and Nele Meier (2016) have argued, becoming a Krampus can be understood as an extended rite of passage in which young men move in and out of liminality for only a few days every year for a decade or even longer. They also come from rather uniform socio-economic backgrounds. Active Krampuses predominantly grow up in rural or suburban middle-class households without a migration background. The Krampus in Austria, therefore, is very male and white. And while feminism, emancipation and immigration have so far not substantially changed these characteristics, many Krampuses still feel that their practice is coming under threat from these three developments. Therefore, the discourse around the history and origin of the Krampus has developed into a highly politicized field, with the Krampus becom-

5 We have observed and documented Krampus events over several years. In 2011 (in Gastein), 2013 (in Salzburg) and 2016 (in Matrei), we conducted extensive fieldwork involving a total of thirty students who participated in field schools of three weeks. The outcome of this collaborative work is presented in Rest and Seiser (2016).

ing one important element in the discussion surrounding white male identity politics.[6]

Let us stress right at the outset that contemporary Krampus practice in Austria is violent on many levels. Through the aesthetics of his mask, his switch, his way of performing and his actual practice of attacking people, he represents and exerts both physical and symbolic violence in the public sphere.[7] Beginning in the 1970s, physical violence or the threat of it against women and children has become increasingly unacceptable and subject to legal sanctions in Austria. However, no matter how 'friendly' an individual Krampus might behave, his presence is always considered to carry a threat of violence that constitutes a transgression of common sense and decency. We will argue that this is one of the main reasons for his recent rise to global popularity.

Fig. 3. Krampuses tearing down the crowd control barriers, Sankt Johann im Pongau, 6.12.2013. Photo: Matthäus Rest

6 In using the words 'male' and 'white', we are referring to the majoritarian imagination we encountered during fieldwork. Maleness here refers to an unambiguous and naturalized identity position of heteronormative cis-masculinity. Whiteness is not a concept frequently used by our informants, but nonetheless it exists as a taken-for-granted assumption of race and ethnicity. We employ it here as an umbrella term for numerous ways of expressing and enacting cultural, ethnic or racial difference.

7 For vivid descriptions of these practices, see Röhm (2016: 56-62).

Framing the Krampus: methodological and theoretical considerations

Krampus events can take very diverse forms and are embedded in a wide and complex discursive field. It is by no means a uniform 'custom', but a whole conglomerate of often conflicting performances that span a wide spectrum: for instance, while some are specifically intended to be consumed by a tourist audience, others are decidedly anti-tourist. During fieldwork we were strongly confronted with questions of identity, belonging and the politics emanating from these topics. In an attempt to deal with these (at times) confusingly entangled threads, we here adopt a layered analysis as proposed by Franz and Keebet von Benda-Beckmann (2007). In their work on property and care in complex contemporary state societies, they distinguish between different layers of social organization, 'which allows the analysis of the interrelations between those layers' (Benda-Beckmann and Benda-Beckmann 2007: 36). As a methodological and heuristic tool, they suggest at least four separate layers: first, the cultural and religious ideals and ideological dimensions of a phenomenon expressed through norms and discursive formations; second, official legal and institutional regulations; third, the social relations in which practices are embedded; and fourth, the social practices themselves in which the effects of all the four layers meet (ibid.: 36 ff.).

In our case, the ideological layer is made up most importantly of arguments about the historical origins and the 'true' meaning of the Krampus phenomenon. Folklorists and representatives of organized folklore are heavily engaged in differentiating the allegedly 'authentic' and 'true' custom from perceived processes of commodification. Here the place and meaning of violence constitute a heavily contested topic. Secondly, legal and institutional regulations affect Krampus performances and direct concrete practices in different ways. Among these we include the self-prescribed rules of active Krampuses, as well as regulations 'from above' made by state and other authorities.

We see the third layer in the social relations into which these social practices are embedded. Identity and belonging are especially strongly mobilized here. In most cases, the members of a troupe are bound by ties of friendship, kinship and spatial proximity. There are whole groups of family members behind the scenes who support and steer the practice. The social composition and the power relations in these groups, each of which consists of between seven and a hundred individuals, are highly diverse and show different facets of identity politics. These three layers are internally structured by a multitude of processes that, taken together, affect the fourth layer, that of the practices of the actors. It is only in these practices that Krampus customs are reproduced and transformed.

Since the 1970s, identity and belonging have been important topics, and they have been diversely conceptualized and empirically investigated in socio-cultural anthropology. The term 'identity' originated in 1950s psy-

choanalytic theory, where it referred to something deeply rooted in the unconscious of the individual 'as a durable and persistent sense of sameness of the self' (Byron 1996: 292). In anthropology, personal identity was seen as having strong connections to social and cultural surroundings. The main disciplinary focus was on collective identities of various kinds of groups as a foundation of community building. The collective identity of ethnic belonging was an important point of departure. Initially, anthropologists tried to describe ethnic identity through the idea of a cultural 'core' unique to each 'culture'. When a group of people believe they belong together, what is it that makes them the same? Through Fredrik Barth's formative contribution to 'ethnic groups and boundaries' (1969), this perspective shifted fundamentally. In his understanding, ethnicity was not defined through essential interior sameness or a form of cultural inventory, but through differentiation from an exterior 'other'. Also, the feminist debates on the category 'woman' in the early 1990s showed that 'woman' is not a uniform identity position but multiply intersects with class, race and religion.

Martin Sökefeld (2012: 47-48) therefore defines individual and collective identities through three aspects: difference, plurality and intersectionality. Difference here relates to the fact that individuals or groups define or describe themselves in contradistinction to others. Krampuses in the Gastein valley, for instance, differentiate themselves from all Krampuses outside the valley as the only 'true' and traditional ones. And every '*Pass*' (Krampus troupe) can give reasons for setting them apart from the neighbouring troupe in the village, others within the region or troupes further afield. Each *Pass*'s positioning in relation to history, social markers, gender politics or the specific equipment they carry, along with their own point of view, comprises a multifaceted mix of factors that are different from any 'other' they compare themselves with. Identity is never grounded on one single difference factor, like origin, age or gender. This multiplicity of difference is the precondition for intersectionality: every human embodies a multiplicity of identities that influence one another in complex ways. Sökefeld (1999) calls on us to take these intersections seriously, instead of investigating categories of identity separately from one another.

Yet identity is more than an anti-essentialist approach in socio-cultural anthropology and other social sciences. In the second half of the twentieth century, many of the subjects and groups social scientists had been working with and about started to use the term for their own purposes (Leve 2011; Sökefeld 2004). Identities were actively created by ethnic or religious groups, by LGBTQI movements and so on, and mobilized in multiple ways to help their diverse agendas. The precondition for these forms of identity politics is almost always an understanding of identity as an essentialist and positive valuation of one's own position (Fillitz 2003). This ethical valuation actualizes identity politics and makes diverse ideas of essential interior sameness

exploitable for purposes of nationalistic or religious emotionalization (Sökefeld 2004).

In acting out identity politics, the relationship between selfing and othering can be modelled in different ways. Following Gerd Baumann (2004: 19), from a structuralist perspective, three 'grammars of us and them' are in use: 1) the grammar of orientalization or reverse mirror-imaging; 2) the segmentary grammar of contextual fission and fusion; and 3) the grammar of encompassment by hierarchical subsumption. The first means that 'the other' can be construed either positively or negatively when held up as a reflection of one's 'own' self. The aim is to improve 'the own', while it is relatively unimportant whether one's projection of 'the other' is accurate or not. In segmentary grammar, people come together to differentiate themselves from others: my town against the neighbouring town, our valley against the next, and so on. Within the third grammar, people attempt to incorporate 'the other' by categorizing it as inferior. A certain level of difference is granted, but only as a variation, a subaltern position within the all-encompassing self. The actors know these different grammars of selfing and othering, and they choose from them according to their intentions and aims (ibid.: 27). Therefore, belonging, which is an intense feeling of being part of a group, is strongly dependent on identity.

Lauren Leve (2011) points out the close relationship between the diffusion of identity politics and the often-violent implantation of liberal democracy in the global South in concert with the spread of neoliberal capitalism. As a result, conflicts over resources and among social groups have been discursively transformed from questions of economic justice into identity issues over which essentialized cultural, religious or ethnic differences 'clash'. As Jean and John Comaroff (2009) showed convincingly, (ethnic) identities have become a global industry and are now being traded like commodities. Cultural heritage – one major source of identity for many Krampus troupes – has long been commodified and turned into a heritage industry (Bendix et al. 2012). Juxtaposing these considerations on identity and belonging to the layers of the social fabric enables us to analyse the complexity of the Krampus without denying the ambiguity inscribed in its diverse practices. Furthermore, this engagement mitigates the widespread risk of slippage into highly normative discussions of whether recent forms of the custom are an 'abomination' of the 'authentic' tradition. Instead, it enables us to describe contemporary Krampus practices as highly political negotiations of identity politics in gendered and racialised fields of discourse.

The ideological dimension or the origins of the myth

How are identity and belonging expressed in accordance with the layers of analysis mentioned above? Starting with its cultural and ideological dimensions, one fundamental aspect of the Krampus identity is to anchor oneself

to history. The mythological explanation imagines the origin of Krampus as an ancient pagan fertility rite that was performed to chase out the winter and revive the reproductive power of nature and humans. In many cases, the origins of Krampus were the first topic that came up after we introduced ourselves as anthropologists to Krampus performers. Often our interlocutors would assume that we were most interested in solving the mystery of the origins of this seemingly ancient tradition and accordingly they would explain its roots to us. These explanations, while in many ways contradictory, tended to agree that the origins of Krampus predate the advent of Christianity at around 700 CE. On other occasions, our informants assumed we were historians and would ask us questions such as, 'Is Krampus a Germanic or a Celtic tradition? And how did Saint Nicholas get involved?' It soon became clear that we would have to engage with the available historical scholarship on the topic in order to take part in these discussions.

By assessing the existing literature, we soon realized that the active Krampuses' convictions about the pre-Christian roots of this custom resulted not from locally passed down knowledge, but from an origin story deliberately disseminated by folklorists in the early twentieth century. According to recent scholarship (Ebner 2018: 33-43; Bockhorn 1994), they were motivated by a clear political agenda. Inspired by the proto-fascist ideology of German nationalism, ethnologists such as Viktor von Geramb, Richard Wolfram and others were convinced that the masked rites were the remnant of a Germanic custom that had been 'moulded' (*überformt*) by Christianity. One of the main aims of National Socialist folk studies, then, was to remove this imagined Christian layer. The frequent attempts to ban the custom by the archbishops of Salzburg and other religious institutions in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries served as a convenient confirmation of this line of argument. In 1940, one of the largest weeklies in Nazi Germany published a photo essay of the Gastein '*Perchtenumzug*' with a convoluted caption reading, 'The ancient custom, frequently banned for its pagan roots, has kept as a precious inheritance its belief in the always recurring spring of peasant *Volkskraft* [people's strength]' (Rübelt 1940: 78-79; all German quotes translated by the authors).

This right-wing agenda was never backed up by serious historical research, and even after the fall of Nazi Germany it took decades for this to happen. Only in the 1980s did the ethnologist Hans Schuhladen start to work systematically through the historical records. He found no 'pagan' origins, and his earliest source is clearly modern: in 1582, in the Bavarian town of Diessen, those who had 'hunted the *Percht*' received a monetary reward. Unfortunately, there are no details of the sequence of the rite or the costumes (Schuhladen 1992: 24). In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, reports from Bavaria, Tyrol and Salzburg abounded; however, the word *Krampus* is absent from all of these historical sources, which all use *Percht* instead to name the practice.

The word *Percht* is commonly associated with the old deity Perchta, but the similarity between the two words is the only clear connection between pre-Christian religious belief and the Krampus. So far, nobody has found a historical source linking the masked parades to any form of cultic or religious practice surrounding the deity. Also, the numerous bans on the practice were not intended to eradicate superstition or pagan traditions but imposed because the authorities saw them as a threat to public order, in the form of young masked people roaming the streets at night, drinking, dancing and fighting. Even more troubling was the fact that girls and boys engaged in these shenanigans together. Until around 1800, there were many of these bans, but hardly any accounts of the custom being banned. Only with the advent of Romanticism and its different attitude towards the peasantry and its culture did descriptions begin to appear (Schuhladen 1992: 26; Kammerhofer-Aggermann and Dohle 2002; Kammerhofer-Aggermann 2010). Judging from these sources, we believe that the most convincing interpretation of the old *Perchten* runs is that they were carnival parades (Kammerhofer-Aggermann 2007: 121). In the months between Advent and Candlemas there was comparatively little work to do in the Alpine peasant economy, so young people gathered in the main households in the villages and the pantries were full. In this vein, in 1841, Ignaz Kürsinger wrote that the *Perchten* customs 'belong to the winter joys of the highlander, comparable to the balls and theatre performances of the city dwellers' (Schuhladen 1992: 28).

These sources, however, do not explain how the strange collaboration between the Krampus and Saint Nicholas came about. Ulrike Kammerhofer-Aggermann (2002: 11) refers to the Bavarian and Tyrolean Nicholas plays that emerged from the Jesuit plays of the Counter-Reformation, arguing that in the nineteenth century these often escalated into wild parades that were only called *Perchten* runs later. In addition, she mentions the so-called 'moving theatre' in Tyrol, where small groups, mostly comprising Nicholas, a devil, Buttenmandl[8] and an angel, went from house to house and performed small theatrical pieces with blessings (Kammerhofer-Aggermann 2010). This reference to the Counter-Reformation is important for two reasons. First, there is ample evidence that the depiction of the devil in the Jesuit theatre was a direct predecessor of the Krampus (Schuhladen 1984). Secondly, it was in the aftermath of the Counter-Reformation, in the 1730s, that Archbishop Leopold Anton von Firmian of Salzburg expelled the remaining Protestant population from his territory. In the Gastein valley, this affected a third of the population (Zimburg 1948: 166 ff.). The vacated farms and miners' houses were taken over by Catholic migrants from Tyrol, thus reinforcing the influence of the Tyrolean Nicholas customs in the archbishopric (Kammerhofer-Aggermann and Dohle 2002: 16).

8 Buttenmandl wear costumes made from straw somewhat similar to British straw bears.

With the simultaneous invention of tradition and folk studies in the second half of the nineteenth century, we for the first time find detailed accounts of masked customs. This is also the time when ideas about their pagan origins first started to appear. It was the folklorists who came up with these theories and implanted this origin myth in the collective imagination of the active Krampuses. The word *Krampus* only rose to popularity in the late nineteenth century in connection with a media phenomenon that emerged in Vienna, which soon spread to many other German-speaking cities through the introduction of the postcard in Austria-Hungary in 1897. People began to send each other red postcards in the weeks leading up to Christmas that depicted the Krampus, often with a short poem and the tagline 'Greetings from Krampus'. Most of the postcards depicting Krampus fall into two categories: children and sex. Either the Krampus is engaged in punishing mischievous children, or he himself is mischief personified and often accompanied by a scantily clad young woman in a clearly erotic pose (Seiser and Rest 2016: 24-26). As a result, we believe that children and sex remain central to understanding the current practice of becoming Krampus in the Alps.

Consequently, this brings us back to the Krampus as a contemporary youth culture and the question: why the recent boom? These days, the first order of business for many newly founded Krampus troupes in small rural towns is to register a website and work on their social media presence. The website is then advertised through large online communities such as Krampusmania.at to ensure traffic and – eventually – brand recognition. We think this is not dissimilar to the Krampus craze around the year 1900, as the postcard of those days has much in common with social media in the last decade. Both are social forms that reshaped communication and profoundly changed the relationship between the private and public spheres. However, our research suggests that there is more to the recent boom than a new and disruptive technology.

On legal and institutional regulations

Krampus practice in Austria today is highly regulated, both internally by the groups themselves and by the state. These regulations, however, vary greatly between different regions. Two of our main field sites over the past five years are considered the regions with the longest continuous Krampus tradition: the Gastein valley, and Matrei, a town in eastern Tyrol. Despite important differences in the way the custom is conducted in these two regions, the legal framework for both is very similar. The code of conduct among Krampuses and between them and other community members is mostly implicit and passed down orally from generation to generation (although currently a process of written codification is under way). The state authorities keep their regulatory role to a minimum; police and ambulance services do their

normal night shifts. The Krampus troupes are not even required to register officially as clubs. In Matrei, as in the three towns in the Gastein valley, the Krampus groups roam the streets freely; there is no official parade, no boundaries and no safe spaces. Whoever leaves their house on those early December nights knows they might encounter the Krampus. At the same time, these are very social nights, and misdemeanours are subject to sanctioning by the local population. In the days following the Krampus events, public opinion in town will determine whether specific actions warrant sanctions beyond naming and shaming.

In both regions, the custom is an important source of pride for local elites, and politicians, teachers and amateur historians strongly support it. Local museums showcase the custom and exhibit historical masks; folklorists – and the occasional anthropologist – are invited to symposia and to observe the custom; woodcarvers are very well respected. Together with students and colleagues, well-known scholars such as the late ethologist Otto Koenig (1983) or the sociologist Roland Girtler (2001) have spent the Krampus season in Matrei for decades. Mayors, woodcarvers and proponents of the custom in both regions have told us in interviews that they alone own the scientifically certified 'true' tradition. From an early age, children are socialized into the tradition; for example, thirteen-year-old teenagers told us that being hit with the Krampus' switch results in fertility (Schnöller 2016). By the time sixteen-year-old boys, supported by whole networks of relatives, establish new troupes, they have already fully embodied the rules and interpretations. Furthermore, in terms of Baumann's grammars of identities, we see here an active form of encompassment, as all Krampus events beyond these two centres are dismissed as inferior and cheap copies.

The public parades we found in all our other field sites require very different forms of security management. At these events, questions of liability are much more pressing, as here spectators and performers are more separated, both socially and spatially, than in the tight-knit communities of Gastein and Matrei. Many of the organizers ask performers to bring along friends to help as stewards and accompany the Krampuses during the parade. Elsewhere, local associations, such as the volunteer fire brigade, help out, while for the few really large parades professional security is hired. Recently, some organizers have started to hand out number badges in order to trace individual performers who misbehave, and many have clear regulations on which forms of switches are allowed. Sometimes, Krampuses are prohibited from using any at all.

In addition, these parades are a very different social form from the Krampus performances in Gastein and Matrei. In most cases spectators want to remain spectators and prefer to be involved only symbolically. Rather than being something to be proud of and to show off to one's girlfriends at school the next day, bruises may be a cause for a formal complaint. A torn jacket

is not part of the game but a potential insurance claim. The security measures taken regulate the interaction between Krampuses and the audience. Furthermore, increasing public exposure through videography, the Internet and social media have had a tremendous influence on the troupes' performances, their masks and accessories over the past few years. At the major parades, troupes now feel they have to 'out-compete' each other. They develop visual and performative identities to differentiate themselves, as they will be remembered only if they look truly special or do something unique. The institutional conditions of the public in the age of social media result in an ever-increasing role for the segmentary grammar of selfing and othering between different troupes. This is rapidly transforming and multiplying their practices and aesthetics.

Fig. 4. Two Krampuses simulating sexual activity, Sankt Johann im Pongau, 6.12.2014. Photo: Gertraud Seiser.

Gendered social relations while *doing* the Krampus

Gender relations are at the core of contemporary Krampus practices. While in Dorfgastein, at least, we heard of several women who, up until the 1970s, became Nicholas's and led troupes from house to house, neither in Gastein nor in Matrei was there a single female Krampus during our fieldwork. When asked about the reasons for this gender divide, both men and women in the valleys agreed that it was because 'women are too weak to carry the heavy gear'. Often these comments naturalized women's weakness to the point

where one of our male informants told us, 'I could also say: I want to be emancipated, I want to have children, but this just doesn't work.' Therefore, the only available role for women is the rather dull one of the angel. This does not mean that Krampus practice is possible without the invisible reproductive labour of women. They help their sons, boyfriends, husbands and brothers to prepare the bags of sweets that troupes leave at all the houses and often do the last-minute mending of costumes. During the Krampus season they keep the performers fed and hydrated, restock the baskets with sweets every few hours and pick up the exhausted men after ten hours of running and drinking to guide them safely to their beds (Grabmaier 2013).

Fig. 5. A woman offering food to a Krampus troupe while they are resting in a carport, Dorfgastein, 6.12.2014. Photo: Matthäus Rest

This invisibility of female labour, of course, is nothing exceptional. But beyond that, the Krampus needs women not just for his reproduction, but as one of the main reasons for his performance. After all, it is mostly women between the ages of fifteen and thirty who attract his interest. While his official *raison d'être* is to punish naughty children, in reality he is often much more interested in chasing young women in the streets or snatching them from behind a kitchen table. In most cases, the attraction is mutual. To many young women, the Krampus season is a highly social time that offers excitement and a chance to figure out how interesting they are to the young men in the community. In Gastein, being caught by a Krampus is normally a rather violent affair. They carry birch switches that they use to deliberately lash at people's thighs. When there is snow, they also like to knock people over and rub snow in their faces. The most reasonable thing, therefore, would be to

wear long underwear and padded skiing pants. Still, most of the young women we encountered wore skinny jeans or even leggings. Some of them told us that, in the following days, they compare their bruises, and wear them with pride. While at first glance this seems to reproduce very stereotypical gender roles of male predators and female prey, things are more complex. For young women 'chasing Krampuses' is clearly a form of asserting agency and claiming space in a highly masculine custom (see Grabmaier 2013; Grabmaier and Scheiber 2016).

Elderly men who perceive themselves as the custodians of the Krampus tradition told us, on numerous occasions, that they were not happy with the fact that young women roam the streets these days, or, if less courageous, drive around the valley to experience the action from the safety of their cars. In their opinion, women's place is within the confines of the home, where they are supposed to take care of smaller children and wait for the troupes to call on them.

Outside the Krampus tradition, things are very different. A lack of qualified work and child care, combined with the better education of young women compared to their male classmates, leads to greater levels of out-migration by young women. Teenage boys in rural Austria generally have more diverse job options than girls. Therefore, after compulsory schooling girls tend to progress to secondary schools, unlike most boys, who are more likely to start an apprenticeship. This results in higher levels of education for women, who are then often unable to find jobs locally that match their qualifications. As a result, more women than men leave to study at university (Larcher et al. 2014). Men who do get university degrees tend to return to the countryside, as they are more likely to inherit property than their sisters.

The Gastein valley, for instance, has a long history of tourism due to its hot springs, which were already famous in the Middle Ages. With the rise of ski tourism in the twentieth century, it has become a popular year-round destination. Many local men work in tourism as mountain guides, ski instructors, lift attendants or masseurs to supplement their incomes from part-time farming. The service staff in hotels and restaurants, on the other hand, almost exclusively consists of migrant workers from Central and Eastern Europe who are predominantly female. Because of the low pay and long hours of work, the local population moved out of this profession about a generation ago. These economic and social conditions were a constant point of reference during our fieldwork. Informants who were critical of the Krampus in particular insisted that we should abandon our folkloristic research project and instead deal with the region's 'real' problems. The Krampus season falls right at the start of the winter, when the locals are preparing for the annual 'foreign invasion'. During this brief interlude, with only locals around, there is no need to perform professional friendliness, consideration and politeness towards anybody. We therefore suggest that the Krampus performance is a

kind of acting out of the regions' contemporary problems, as we see here a specific intersection of identity positions or factors of difference (in this case gender, ethnicity, age and local identity) that is clearly distinct from the more urban Salzburg. Women, as well as men, see their involvement in the custom as a service to the community, and hardly anyone questions the gendered division of labour. During those weeks, gender roles suddenly seem unambiguous, with the women relegated to supporting roles as 'in the good old days'.

This is not to say that younger Krampuses in and around Salzburg have embraced the agenda of women's emancipation. Most troupes we encountered in our work were highly masculine social systems that mirrored the multi-layered hierarchies of exclusion that are so central to Krampus traditions throughout Austria. We found a paradigmatic example of this on the outskirts of Salzburg, where a couple of troupes have existed since the 1960s and 1970s. In contrast to the Gastein valley, where in most cases a *Pass* consists of a peer group of five to ten male teenagers who start becoming Krampuses in their late teens, remain a troupe for around five to fifteen years and then disband, as they lack any formal legal status, in the Salzburg area the troupes are registered societies and often have dozens of members of various ages. Contrary to the egalitarian ethics of *Passen* in Gastein, in one of the long-established Salzburg troupes we found a highly hierarchical structure reminiscent of fraternities or other male secret societies. In addition, the core group of active Krampuses are men between sixteen and thirty years of age. The men involved participate in a highly liminal stage that allows them to disassociate themselves from their normal social interactions. During the two weeks leading up to the troupe's major event – a choreographed acrobatic performance – they take time off work to prepare the venue for the event. The evenings are spent drinking and partying together in a basement (aptly called 'the crypt'), where most of them also sleep for those two weeks. They call this time 'the fifth season' during which they do not feel bound by the social conventions they adhere to during the rest of the year. For instance, monogamy is suspended during that time. Consequently, their girlfriends and wives are explicitly prohibited from entering the crypt; other women, however, are allowed to enter when invited (Meyer 2016).

However, participant observation showed that the main form of sexuality performed in this space was not so much extramarital heterosexual intercourse, but rather a very intense form of male bonding with strong homoerotic overtones. Especially during those boozy evenings, we observed a lot of physical and erotic interaction between the men. It often started with verbal teasing, then moved on to tactile show fights, often ending in a tender and loving embrace. At the same time, as much as the troupe's internal discourse constantly reaffirms their exclusion of women, they also strongly perform their antipathy to homosexuality, with someone or something being 'gay' qualifying as the central and most frequently used derogatory term.

The Krampus of this well-educated upper-middle-class setting is not about threatening women with violence. The goal of the *Pass* is to display a shared acrobatic and organizational excellence that is admired by an audience of the same class. Close physical intimacy reduces the risk of injury in acrobatic stunts; their production is made possible by an identity based on a strict dissociation from homosexuality.

This is not to say that all long-established Krampus groups in the city of Salzburg perform gender relations in this way. Another troupe that has been active since the 1960s, for instance, organizes some of the largest events in town and comprises of a few closely interconnected family groups. They are proud of their traditional masks and their maintenance of the custom, which they also perform outside Salzburg. For instance, in 2014 they sent representatives to Los Angeles, and in 2017 they performed in Munich (in both cases observed by members of our research group). In this family-based association women can take on all roles, including the Krampus.

Imagined Muslim attacks on the Krampus

Another central theme of the Krampus in contemporary Austria surrounds questions of immigration and integration. Every autumn since 2006 proponents of the right-wing Freedom Party (FPÖ) have claimed that Saint Nicholas is banned from public nursery schools in Vienna, despite the fact that this allegation is completely unfounded. In their narrative, the reason for the imagined ban is that the authorities do not want to upset Muslim parents by holding Christian festivals. The controversy is therefore similar to the frequently alleged 'war on Christmas' in the United States. Through the imagination of an 'attack on our culture', populist movements can construct an image of the West under siege. Their xenophobic demands thus come to be reframed as a legitimate form of cultural self-defence.

The trope of the Krampus under attack is also mobilized in a more immediate way. During our fieldwork in Salzburg in 2013, several times we heard the story of a knife attack. People told us that a Turk had stabbed a Krampus to death at a parade, or alternatively that he survived with severe injuries. The story had all the ingredients of an urban legend. None of our informants had witnessed the incident, but 'a friend of a friend' had. An extensive search in the archives of the Austria Press Agency yielded no results, so we can be certain that this did not happen in the past twenty years.

That is not to say that there are no clashes at parades. Both performers and spectators have told us stories of aggressive migrant teenagers who attack Krampuses, allegedly because 'they don't know the custom and how to engage with a Krampus'. When we accompanied a troupe to a parade in Hallein, however, we noticed the opposite: strong aggression directed at Muslims and Islam in general by the Krampus performers. Hallein is an old

mining and industrial town on the outskirts of Salzburg. The members of the Krampus troupe referred to the town as 'Little Istanbul' because of the large number of inhabitants with Turkish roots. In their opinion, it was only a matter of time before a minaret would be built, followed by a muezzin calling for prayer. If you were to stay in Hallein any longer, they continued, you would risk forgetting your German. They told us there were hardly any 'native' children left in local schools. Before their performance at the parade, our informants gathered at a mulled wine stall to drink, banter and mingle with members of other troupes. Migrants were referred to as 'disturbing elements' that do not belong in a Krampus parade. With every glass of wine the derogatory comments increased. Before the parade, all the Krampus groups gathered at the 'starting line', which, incidentally, was directly in front of a mosque. Our interlocutors had to wait for two hours; before long they noticed the building and started to ridicule it. They insisted on us taking their picture in full Krampus attire in front of the mosque and started to pose shouting 'Muschi! Muschi!'[9] Members of the other troupes thought it was amusing. After the parade, and upon returning to the troupe's home town, we ended the evening at the Krampuses' favourite haunt, where we met some of their friends from a different troupe. When they learned that our informants had just returned from Hallein, they immediately asked whether they could still speak German and whether they now owned a headscarf (Rest and Sartori 2016).

As these examples show, the Krampus is often mobilized to undergird what Baumann's typology identifies as grammars of orientalization. Muslims are imagined as aggressive enemies of the custom who refuse to conform and instead want to change the culture of white Europeans. What is rendered invisible in this narrative is the large number of Muslim immigrants who enjoy the parades as much as their non-Muslim neighbours and the increased interest from migrants in also becoming active Krampuses.

In the Gastein valley, there are still only a handful of performers with a migration background. But there we learned of another surprising 'Turkish connection' that makes us wonder how 'local' the traditional Gastein Krampuses are. Elderly men told us almost unanimously that everything that is needed to sustain the Krampus tradition should be locally sourced, if possible from within the valley. Thus the African antelope horns seen at parades outside the valley would never be accepted there. The sheepskins for the coats, the pinewood and the ram- and goat-horns for the masks should all originate from the region. After a few glasses of schnapps, however, a man in his sixties from Bad Hofgastein told us about one of his great youthful adventures in the late 1970s. With the increasing shift to cattle-farming, long and impressive goat horns had become rare, so when a Turkish colleague told him about the abundance of goats in his home country, he and a friend decided

9 *Muschi* means 'pussy'. The word for mosque in German is *Moschee*.

to see for themselves. They travelled all the way to the villages around Izmir in his VW Beetle. Once there, they filled up the whole car with goat horns and triumphantly drove them back to Gastein. After finishing his story, our interlocutor grinned sarcastically and contemplated how many of the priceless 'historical masks' that were said to represent local identity had Turkish horns. This, of course, is nothing new. As with many of the masked winter customs in the region, even in the early modern era long-distance connections were the norm rather than the exception, as Ulrike Kammerhofer-Aggermann has convincingly argued (2015). Her historical research shows that the carnival in Venice was a significant point of reference, and places like Gastein or Matrei are located along important trade routes connecting southern Germany with Venice.

Fig. 6. A Krampus attacking spectators at a Krampus party, Dorfgastein, 3.12.2011. Photo: Gertraud Seiser

Conclusion

As our examples have shown, the Krampus in Austria is an important site for the production and reproduction of identities. Especially for the performers, becoming a Krampus gives them a unique way of exploring relations of gender and race. Therefore, we see the Krampus as a prime site in which to explore white male identity politics in Austria and beyond. As the example of the wrongly proclaimed ban of Saint Nicholas in Viennese nurseries demonstrates, the Krampus's influence is not limited to his mostly rural range. Our empirical work reveals the remarkable diversity of opinions and identities performed through becoming a Krampus. Working through different aspects

of this so-called custom, we have shown that all three grammars of identity and alterity postulated by Gerd Baumann can be found in the often contradictory practices subsumed under the label 'Krampus'.

However, this is not to say that all three grammars impact on processes of identity formation in a symmetrical way. After hundreds of interviews, we are certain that the main allure in becoming Krampus for young white men in rural Austria today is indeed nostalgia for a form of unambiguous, confident, heteronormative masculinity in an ethnically homogenous society that is far from their everyday experience. The increasing emancipation of women, the increasing precarity of the labour market and the growing presence and influence of immigrants are processes that attack classic male white identities all over the region. For many young men, becoming Krampus is a way to 'stand their ground' in these ongoing and emerging conflicts over resource allocation. If we think about other recent examples from around the planet, we cannot help but observe a strong tendency among young men in times of uncertainty to resort to violence that warrants further ethnographic research. Given the widespread feeling of growing uncertainty in Austria, especially after the arrival of a substantial number of refugees over the past few years, we are sure that the Krampus boom has only just begun.

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